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Youth and Politics: Political Education and Participation among Youth

Reviewed by Christof Wittmaack

The discussion about youth and politics is widely popular among scholars, in the media and in public debate. In their anthology *Youth and Politics: Political Education and Participation among Youth* Aydin Gürlevik, Klaus Hurrelmann and Christian Palentien (eds.) give a systematic overview of different fields of the debate. In 25 articles, including the introduction, the authors address popular claims – such as young people being “un-political” or their alleged inability to make well-founded political decisions – and they lay out different models to stimulate youth participation.

The anthology is divided into five parts. In the first part theoretical basics are presented, while the second part examines youth participation empirically. The third part presents different models to enhance youth participation and is in turn divided into three chapters – 1) the right to vote, 2) different forms of youth advisory councils such as youth parliaments, and 3) youth ombudspersons. All of the approaches are subsequently evaluated in the fourth part before the anthology concludes in Part 5 with a look at the future of youth participation. Given the large number of articles in the anthology, this review limits itself to discussing only a selection of them.

In Part 1 of the anthology several scholars discuss widespread concerns about young people’s right to vote and warn of simplifications and generalisations. For instance, Marc Paretzke and Andreas Klee as well as Jürgen Gerdes and Uwe H. Bittlingmayer point out imprecise definitions of “political participation”, “youth” or “politics”, which are often used in everyday discourse, but which by no means describe discrete entities. Therefore, claims such as “more participation equals more democracy” or “a right to vote for children and youth equals more participation” need to be handled carefully (41), given the fact that trends ascribed to youth can often be observed throughout society as a whole.

The most prominent concern opposing the



children’s right to vote is the claim that they simply lack the cognitive abilities to make well-founded political judgements. However, Rolf Oerter points out that youths are, in fact, able to think logically at a young age but are still developing the ability for complex and dialectic thinking by adopting further cultural knowledge. Besides, he emphasises that, while knowledge is indeed necessary to make mature decisions, the variety of political decisions might also be limited by excluding new perspectives (74-75). Consequently, he advocates in favour of a partial enfranchisement of children and youth in spheres which are easier to fathom than federal or foreign politics, for instance in schools or families (81). Despite providing a balanced analysis of children’s ability to vote, parts of Oerter’s argumentation remain unclear. Even though he makes it a point to address both, the better comprehensibility of small political constructs, especially for young children, as well as the possible gain by adding unprejudiced perspectives to the political debate – the reason for which he favours the first argument over the second – is elusive.

Despite the unquestionable importance of youth for political socialisation, Heinz Reinders demands more differentiated re-

search on the question of how childhood and youth influence political socialisation (97). Thus he observes a one-dimensional focus on youth in research on political socialisation. Moreover, he dismisses claims of an alleged political apathy among youth and stresses the importance of other means of participation in order to evolve political socialisation.

Fundamental political rights are granted to every citizen – including youths – by the German constitution. However, in his article Ingo Richter discusses in how far young people are constrained in exercising their rights in families, at school, or at work, and he highlights how fundamental rights conflict with one another. He evaluates several interpretations of when children come of age – upon turning 18, when they are born, or when they are “mature” enough (148-152). With respect to education, Richter examines the kinds of situations in which the right and duty of parents to educate their children might conflict with the children’s right to freely develop their personality and to exercise their political rights autonomously. Because of the freedom of children to have an autonomous opinion, parents are not allowed to impose their views on their own children. However, as soon as any legal obligations result from young people’s opinion, for instance by obtaining membership in a political party, or if there are any possible dangers involved, such as violence at a rally, parental approval is needed (155-156). Concerning education at schools, the matter is not as difficult. While schools cannot fulfil their duty to political education by depriving the students of their political rights, students are not allowed to use the school premises for their political goals without the school’s permission (157).

While the first part of the anthology is mainly about the theory of political participation, the second part sheds light on the empirical research on political participation among young people. The lack of political interest and participation and a general trend

Instead of worrying whether young people from all social backgrounds participate, they argue that structures of democracy for children and youth should be institutionalised first. While there is some validity to this claim, their implication that youth participation works solely as an elite activity is pretty harsh. Despite these limitations, the authors' well-structured and comprehensive approach to participation in youth parliaments is very enriching.

In his article, Hans Fraeulin evaluates the role of children and youth lobbies, drawing from his experience as a youth ombudsman in Graz, Austria. While providing interesting insights about the deficits youth ombudspersons face in their work, such as a limited budget or bureaucracy, the article is rather disappointing. Not only is it clearly out-dated – judging from his sources (with one exception all his sources were published in 1996 or earlier) or the examples that he uses, such as youth magazines or organisations which no longer exist – but he constantly uses terms such as “recently” or “this year” despite referring to his time in office in the mid-1990s. Given the changes in youth participation over the last 20 years, this is inadequate. Another point of criticism is the lack of neutrality in his writing, on the one hand, and the attempt to create objectivity, on the other hand, by referring to himself in the third person, and thus generalising his experience.

In Part 5 several views on youth participation are discussed. Aydin Gürlevik and Christian Palentien emphasise the relevance of lowering the age limit of the franchise in order to support the political socialisation of youth. Like many authors before them, they argue that young people do not trust politicians to solve problems in their areas of interest. Moreover, they observe a lack of clear political vision in the political debate. Because of cuts in the educational sector, young people are confronted with limitations at an early stage of their lives. Gürlevik and Palentien argue that by allowing them to have a say in politics – by franchise as well as several other forms of participation – political apathy could be averted. This way, not only could the situation of young people be changed, but also their perception of political stakeholders. Nonetheless, general problems – such as the complicated language used by politicians, corruption, unfulfilled campaign pledges, the influence of powerful lobbies or a freezing of investment in education – remain

counterproductive in the quest for stronger youth participation.

To conclude Part 5 – and the anthology – Christian Lueders and Thomas Rauschenbach take a slightly different approach to youth politics by addressing the entire field and not just particular measures. They observe a general trend in German youth politics to shift the focus from underprivileged youth to participation and supporting capabilities and proclaiming “independent youth politics”. However, in their article Lueders and Rauschenbach challenge this proclamation. In view of a lack of clarity in analysing which age groups are addressed by youth politics, they emphasise the risk of a competition between children's and youth politics. Moreover, by pointing out the overlap with other policy fields such as education, employment, health care, security, gender, and immigration, they conclude that youth politics cannot be considered an independent policy field just yet (511). In order to promote a dialogue about an independent youth policy, they develop a concept which unites four policy dimensions: protection and support, enablement, participation, and generation (515). Moreover, they emphasise the necessity for youth politics to articulate clear goals as well as the need for lively academic discussion about how youth politics should be shaped.

To evaluate the anthology, it is important to remember its purpose. Given the wide debate on youth and participation, the authors aim to provide an overview of the field. For this reason, spectacular new findings should not be expected. However, the anthology is a comprehensive entry point for newcomers to the field.

Considering its aim, the structure of the anthology is admirable. Several theoretical assumptions as well as stereotypes about youth participation are addressed and backed up by empirical evidence. Moreover, the reader gets a good overview of all the different concepts devised to improve youth participation, which stimulates the interest in further reading. Given this, the anthology's neglect of concepts such as youth quotas is reasonable. By discussing already implemented frameworks and ideas, an important link between theory and practical experiences is established.

Even in the academic debate, youth participation is an emotional topic. Nevertheless, most authors in the anthology avoid polemicising and present their arguments in a factual manner, which is clearly ben-

eficial to readers. While it is common to perceive youth participation as essential for a vital democracy, the authors present quite different ideas on how to stimulate it. However, as Hurrelmann and others correctly point out, a difference can only be made by combining several approaches. Another important claim is the need to transform the political culture in order to fight political apathy (or rather disenchantment with politicians) not only among youth, but among society as a whole.

Undoubtedly, improving youth participation is an infinite process which will always require further academic as well as public debate. Meanwhile, the anthology *Youth and Politics* is well equipped to motivate the next generation of thinkers to further develop youth participation.

Gürlevik, Aydin / Hurrelmann, Klaus / Palentien, Christian (eds.) (2016): Jugend und Politik: Politische Bildung und Beteiligung von Jugendlichen. Wiesbaden: Springer. 528 pages. ISBN: 978-3-658-09144-6. Price: €49.99.